year that Muhammad Atta, one of the September 11 ringleaders, met an Iraqi intelligence agent in Prague months before the hijackings, but U.S. and Czech officials subsequently cast doubt on whether such a meeting ever happened. Some militants trained in Taliban-run Afghanistan are helping Ansar al-Islam, a Kurdish extremist group that Suddam uses to harass his own Kurdish foes. Finally, al-Qaeda members fleeing Afghanistan have reportedly hid in northern Iraq, but in areas beyond Saddam's control. In addition, evidence has recently come to public light suggesting a wider array of contacts between al-Qaeda and the Iraqi regime than had previously been know, including hospital care for an al-Qaeda leader.

In this context, the case for military intervention at this time rests on three key assumptions: that the containment of Iraq through sanctions is a failed policy; that the Cold War concept of deterrence is no longer a viable strategy for dealing with an erratic Iraqi leadership potentially allied with al-Qaeda or other terrorists; and that new unrestricted weapons inspections, even if Saddam were to agree to them, are unlikely to be effective.

There is perhaps a fourth, albeit often unstated basis for intervention: that deposing Saddam and establishing a democratic, western-oriented government in Baghdad would decisively reshape the politics of the region in a manner highly beneficial to the United States, by delegitimizing the forces of radicalism and creating a powerful model of Islamic modernity and moderation.

Taken together, these assumptions make a compelling case for the United States and the United Nations to seek, both through the enforcement of existing resolutions as well as the enactment of one or more additional resolutions, Iraq's complete and unconditional compliance with all relevant UN resolutions, particularly those demanding the disarmament of its weapons of mass destruction.

To paraphrase the just war theologian Michael Walzer in his discussion of the ethics of Israel's preemptive intervention against Egypt in 1967 and an Iraqi nuclear reactor in 1981, Saddam Hussein, through his continued efforts to develop weapons of mass destruction and their means of delivery has demonstrated a manifest capability and intent to injure, and a degree of active preparation that makes that intent a positive danger. The great judgmental question is, to again cite Walzer, whether in the current situation waiting, or doing anything other than military engaging, magnifies the risk.

It is perhaps likely, even highly likely, that Saddam will ultimately refuse to meet the demands of the world community. Particularly if this is the case, authorization by the Security Council for regime change would be an appropriate response. But there is little evidence that suggests the immediate, urgent ''necessity of self-defense,'' so instant, and overwhelming, as to leave the United States no choice of means, and no moment for deliberation. The case for regime change is compelling, but precipitating a change in leadership is different than going to war with a country and its people.

Containment through targeted sanctions—in effect, coercive arms control—is fraying, in part because of irresolution on the part of key members of the U.N. Security Council, such as Russia and France, and because both Iraq and key regional states profit from sanctions-busting. According to the General Accounting Office, Iraq may have earned as much as $2.2 billion last year in illicit exports and oil surcharges. Over time, the breakdown in containment would almost certainly create conditions under which Iraq could produce a nuclear weapon.

Nevertheless, flawed as sanctions may be, published reports in the press this summer suggested many senior U.S. military officers believed that Saddam Hussein poses little immediate threat and have concluded that the United States should for the time being continue its policy of containment rather than intervening directly.

Can Saddam be deterred from aggressive action now and in the future, particularly if he is able to successfully accelerate development of weapons of mass destruction? The evidence is mixed. During the Persian Gulf War, he refrained from using weapons of mass destruction because of American and Israeli threats of nuclear retaliation. He was likewise deterred from again attempting to attack Kuwait in 1994.

Yet he is so hostile to the United States and Israel, so bent on regional domination, his frames of reference and decision-making processes so opaque, and possibly irrational, and his ties to international terrorism such as obvious source of concern, that it is at best an open question whether a nuclear-armed Saddam is ultimately deterrable. In the long run, it is highly probable that no American president can afford to take that risk.

As to inspections, the evidence suggests that an intrusive inspections regime can produce positive results, but can never be fully reliable or completely effective. In their first five years, the United Nations Special Commission in Iraq (UNSCOM) made some progress toward inspecting and disarming Iraq's chemical, biological, and missile materials and capabilities. The so-called IAEA Action Team, did the same for Iraq's nuclear program. The main problem was that UNSCOM was never allowed to fully scan the country or finish its work. Since the Iraqi government terminated its work four years ago, the country has been free of monitoring and inspection.

Just war doctrine focuses on right intentions and prospects for success. Intentions and goals matter in war. A nation should only wage war for the cause of justice, rather than for self-interest or aggrandizement. The issue of intention must be balanced with concern for practicalities as well as consequences, both of which should be considered before declaring war. The decision to go to war must be essentially protective; the goal of war is to obtain a just and durable peace. The ancillary requirement that there must be prospects for success means that the use of arms must not produce negative effects and disorders graver than the evil to be eliminated.

In this case the risks of inaction are real; the risks of action extraordinary. The only certainty is that any military action involving a great power will bring about unintended consequences. It is a distinct possibility but not certainty that conflict with Saddam will be short and decisive, as it was during the Gulf War. It is also possible that a new regime can be found and put in place with as much ability and legitimacy as in Afghanistan.

On the other hand, one should always hope for the best but plan for the worst. America's greatest living statesman, George F. Kennan, recently made the sage observation that ''war has a momentum of its own, and it carries you away from all thoughtful intentions when you get into it. Today, if we went into Iraq . . . you know where you begin. You never know where you are going to end.''

Many have expressed concern about the ''end game''—the difficulty of potential street combat, of establishing legitimate government, of dealing with the long-term implications for American interests in the Muslim world of an intervention in Iraq. But concern for the ''end game'' should not cloud the enormous difficulties of the ''beginning game.'' What happens when a strike commences?

What happens to our ability to secure cooperation in the long-term campaign against global terrorism? What about American leadership in the global economy?

From an operational perspective, the assumption in some quarters appears to be that once we initiate conflict Saddam will be on the defensive, hunkering down, perhaps waging defensive guerrilla warfare in the cities and countryside, while the United States and its allies enjoy the initiative.

This may be the case, but Saddam has had a lot of time to strategize on how to maximize American casualties, energize potential support outside Iraq—including terrorists—and increase his martyrdom.

My concern is that Israel may be underestimating the potentially devastating effects of a biological weapons assault while the United States may be understanding the potential of a pan-Muslim backlash.

In terms of military pitfalls for the United States, one ''nightmare'' scenario involves determined resistance in Baghdad and perhaps other major cities by the Iraqi Republican Guard. Should we be compelled to engage, the casualties on both sides, including civilians, could be substantial.

But the greatest danger that we cannot ignore is the possibility that a campaign against Iraq expands into a wider conflict within the Arab world against Israel. Indeed, it is virtually inconceivable that military intervention against Iraq will not cause an immediate retaliatory strike against Israel. In the Gulf War, Iraq sent 39 scud missiles against Israel—missiles that could have been but were not tipped with chemical weapons. Chemical weapons were used with some devastation in World War I and in closed settings with gruesome ramifications in the Holocaust. Today the vastly greater danger is biological agents. Biological weapons pose a danger thousands of times greater than chemical weapons. The delivery of such weapons on missiles, unmanned aircraft, by hand and or through the mail could be traumatic for Israel and world society. Likewise, if Iraq were to launch any kind of weapons of mass destruction against Israel, Israel would have to seriously consider a retaliatory response, perhaps including nuclear weapons.

It is also conceivable that action against Iraq, particularly a prolonged campaign with significant civilian casualties, could spark outrage in the Muslim world, and unleash a new surge of anti-Americanism. While there is little support for Saddam Hussein outside of Iraq, there is extraordinary opposition to America going to war against a Muslim country. Terrorism around the world could be supercharged. Even without Israeli involvement, friendly governments in Jordan, Pakistan and